

**[Tom Mills]**

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Words

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by

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Range Lore and Cowboy

Reminiscences Before and After 1875 UVALDE COUNTY, DISTRICT #10

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### TOM MILLS.

Uncle Tom Mills, frontier Negro cowpuncher and horsebreaker, was born in Alabama during slave days, coming to Texas in 1862 settling on the Sabinal River in the Patterson settlement.

Uncle Tom is a veteran cow hand having taken to ranch life as a young boy. He rode wild horses, worked wild cattle and came face to face with panthers and lobos. There was no recompense for hours of night herding in the rain and sleet; it was all in a days day's work.

"But that was the life I loved," he said, simply. "We had the choicest of meats, we parched our own coffee, we drank from our own hats, we broke our own horses and done our own fighting! But we had our fun, I can tell you!"

Tom Mills is not decrepit. Like most outdoor men he is hale, hearty and active. He will celebrate his 79th birthday Sunday, October 17, 1937.

"About the first hoss I ever remember ridin' after cattle was at the Kennedy place on the Sabinal (River). They had a little field right below that place and they had it planted in co'n. They had cut bresh and laid it down and then took other bresh and stuck it down through that to make a fence. The cattle got to going in there and this here George Paterson Patterson told me to get on his hoss and go down there and run them cattle out of the field. I started the cattle out and one of 'em cut back and when my hoss give a quick turn (to head off the cow) 2 I fell off and the hoss left there with the saddle on. When the hoss left I wnt went the other way, but when Mr Patterson caught 'im, he didn't say nothin' much about it.

"My first outfit to work with would tickle you. I had just an old saddle without any saddle skirts. They made me some leggings out of rawhide. When they got wet they would get loose, but when they got dry, I couldn't straighten out my legs.

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"I always helped start the herds for the trail but I never did go up the trail for when the outfit started back to the ranch, they always wanted me back there.

"Things was pretty wild and wooly them days. I was with the Reynolds family right after Emancipation and I was in town with Bill Reynolds one day. Bill was talkin' to Bill Crouch's sheep boss and this sheep boss was standin' with his arm across the neck of Reynold's hoss. I didn't hear what they were sayin' but directly I heard a gun fire and looked around to see the sheep boss fallin'. Mr Reynolds had his foot in the stirrup to get on his hoss, but when he shot the other man, he turned him over and looked at him, then got on his hoss and rode off. They didn't do nothin' to 'im.

"I've seen lots of Indians but they never did bother me. I've heard fellers tell about fightin' Indians that I know never fought one in their lives. I remember one foggy mornin'; we were to meet some fellows that were roundin' up a bunch of cattle. Pretty soon my men saw this other outfit and stampeded. They thought they were Indians. I never run because I saw the men at the same time and knew they were the bunch we were going to meet. One the fellows in the bunch that day when he got to the ranch, he was so scared he asked 'em to let him 3 go under the bed! And this same old man, before he died, he used to tell how he fought the Indians.

"The Indians was bad all right. When they was comin' into the country, they didn't do no damage. It was when they went out that they would do their devilment. They generally went out in the full of the moon and that's when they did all their mischief.

"We used to hold some pretty lively Kangaroo Courts out in camp. I know your Uncle Demp Fenley, him and Rutledge was movin' a herd once and Mr Demp he come into camp one evening and got to tellin' yarns. He was an awful feller to tell yarns. But when he happened to think about the Kangaroo Court that night, he knew he was in for it, so he said, Excuse me boys! I forgot myself! Of course he was the boss and I think he got off. They got me one time, I told the boys Jap Hurd was comin' to take charge of the outfit.

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They didn't like him and began to get sore about it so I told 'em better and they began on me. They didn't tie me down, but they knew I wasn't goin' to stand after the first lick.

"They had a judge and other officers, and they got you up in court for everything just to have fun. You didn't want to tell a lie at no time or no smutty jokes, especially at dinner time. It sure stopped this smutty yarn talk in camp. It was a good thing.

"I never did use no profane language or go to no saloons and drink. I never took a drink of whiskey or fooled around a saloon in my life.

"I remember seeing a pretty woman by the name of Miss Annie Berry. Her brother was Lynn Berry and their father broke his neck runnin' mustangs. Annie Berry was living down near Frio Town. She never worked right in an outfit but she could catch a cow or a calf as good as any boy.

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She was as good a roper as any of 'em and who could ride through the bresh too. When she got after 'old calf,' she'd sure ketch 'im. I seen her on hosses that wasn't well broke and she rode these old time side saddles, too. I've seen them side saddles that had three horns and I think her saddle did. Anyway, she had a ring fixed under those horns on the right side of the saddle and she kept her rope tied in that ring. We used to tie our ropes around the horn mostly, but she tied her rope in that ring.

"She was sho' a pretty girl. She had light hair and a fair skin and I tell you, there wasn't many as pretty as she was. She married a fellow by the name of Bill Allen but they separated. She was killed after that. I think she was goin' with a fellow that killed her. She wasn't a big woman and there wasn't many like Miss Annie. She made a picture on them wild hosses and she could sure handle 'em.

"There was a widow woman down near Cotulla that used to ride and work stock. I don't remember her name just now but she had a terr'ble lot of hosses. (Probably the Widow

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Burk.) She kept men there to work and she wore her guns just like a man. I've seen her many a time and I remember what big herds of hosses she had.

"You see there used to be lots of wild hosses in that country below Pearsall. It was open country down there and there was thousands of mustangs runnin' over that sand. There was mustang pens all over that country. Talley Burnett, a man I worked for, he found a fine mustang he wanted once. He could shoot them mustangs in the neck, above the neck bone — they called it 'creasin' 'em' — and he meant to crease that stallion and shot too low and killed 'im. He was 5 a pretty thing and Mr. Talley sure wanted 'im.

"I've seen stallions — their mane and tail would be that long (eighteen or twenty inches) — and sometimes their manes would come to their shoulders and their tails would drag the ground. I've seen 'em milk-white, not a black hair on 'em. About the prettiest one I ever saw was one of these white ones. He was as round-bodied as he could be and had a small head and glass eyes; that is, sort of blue eyes. He was sure pretty. They caught 'im and gentled 'im and he was already broke in when I first saw him. But, I remember about the prettiest stallion runnin' wild I ever saw. It was down in those sand hills below Pearsall. He was a red roan. He had a bunch with 'im and I got a good look at 'em but I never caught that stallion.

"It was a peculiar thing about that. What do you suppose mustangs would do when they would spy you? Why, they would come right to you. A hoss is intelligent. When a smart hoss sees something he don't understand, he's goin' to work around and see what it is before he runs. And those mustangs, they would always come right toward you. When they got close enough, they'd go plumb around you, but they's never break and run as soon as they saw you; they'd come right where you could get a good look at every one of 'em. Then when they went around you, that would be about the last you would see except the dust. You sure couldn't head 'em off!

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"I rode so many mean hosses, I can't remember which was the meanest. About the most vicious hoss I ever rode tried to eat me up. He never throwed me; that was something they didn't do, unless I wasn't lookin' for it. I was mighty near a hoss-conqueror. This here hoss would reach around and bite my legs. I sure had to watch 'im. I've 6 had 'em fight me and even kick my heels in the stirrups.

"About the hardest ride I ever made was from Frio Town to San Antonio and back. It was about eighty miles up there and I left about eleven o'clock one night to get a fever thermometer for Dr. Graves and I got back the next evenin'. It was sure a rough, hard ride and it was durin' Indian times, too.

"I rode that way at night for doctors and other families many a time. It didn't make no difference to me. I rode nine miles to get the doctor once and after I got there, I had to ride two miles after his hoss, but I was just gone an hour and a half. I brought the doctor back, all right. They said, 'Don't spare the hoss,' and I knew I had to ride.

"About the most peculiar brand I ever run across was up on the divide. We used to work stock up there (in the Rocksprings section) and we run on to a hog now and then that had 'BIG PIG' branded branded on 'im. We would strike 'im every spring.

"I remember one old fellow that branded [?] VR, all connected (RR) and at one time, there was about 1,500 head of hosses runnin' under that brand. Them Mexkin brands, they was so peculiar you couldn't remember 'em or name 'em either. There used to be the Dinner Bell brand near Bandera. It looked like the bell on this 'Liberty Bell' flour.

"I rode a hoss for George Harper one day. He sent me word to ketch up a big sorrel and break 'im and he'd give me ten dollars. I got that hoss up and brought 'im up to where I lived and tied 'im up and next mornin' I rode 'im. Some people come to the house and was watchin'. That old hoss sho' was pitchin and I heard these people say, 7 'O, he ain't pitchin' hard; his legs is too stiff!' Well, they ought to been on him. I had a new saddle and the

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saddle pockets tied on with buckskin strings and when he quit pitchin', both pockets were on one side. The next day, he got to pitchin' and jumped up and fell right back and buried the saddle horn in the sand but he didn't get me. Then, I got on 'im and rode 'im through a lot of thickets and I noticed he kept flinchin' so I decided to get that flinch out of 'im when I got in the clearin'. The grass burs was knee-high, so I give 'im a cut with my quirt and he throwed me right in those grass burs. There was nobody to see it, so I picked the burs out and got on 'im to whip the pitch out of 'im, but he wouldn't pitch. That was the last time he pitched with me. But, he was mean. And the father of that hoss couldn't be rode. He would pitch a man to death. I knew, at least, two men that took hemorrhages from tryin' to ride that hoss.

"I believe Talley Burnett was about the best pistol and rifle shot I ever saw. He could be ridin' along with his rifle in his scabbard and a deer would jump up and he'd say, 'Watch me break his neck!' He'd step off his hoss and kill that deer before it could get away, every time.

"I knew an Englishman in '87 that could shoot a .22 and hand you the hull and let you pitch it up and he could hit it every shot. I think he was better than [Toopperwein?] for he worked for a Winchester company and was an extra fine shot. But, he couldn't hit a deer.

"I've seen lots of good ropers. I seen Forrest Tollett's father, Alf Tollett, go into the pen where it was takin' three men to the animal and he'd put as many animals down by himself as the others could with help. He's put his rope around his waist and work alone.

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I've seen Old Man Alf, when he rode these outlaw hosses, go get one of these outlaws and tail two more to this one and take 'em where he was goin' to break 'em. One time, I seen 'im when his hoss fell. He had his rope down to rope something and his hoss got up and got Alf's foot tangled up in the rope. The hoss broke to run and Alf saw he'd be drug to death because he had his rope tied to the horn of the saddle. Bein' stout like he was,

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he set back on that rope and throwed that hoss. Before he could get his foot untangled, the hoss got up and started again. He throwed 'im the second time and then got to the hoss and jumped on 'im. Of course he had plenty of time, then, to get his foot untangled. He was the best cowhand and the best roper I ever saw in my life. He couldn't be beat in the pens and when it came to a mean hoss, he'd ketch 'im by both ears and hold the hackamore (a rope fashioned something like a bridle, but without bits) in his mouth. He'd put that hackamore on that hoss by himself.

"I've seen some pretty mean bulls out on the range, too. There was one come into our camp one mornin' and hooked two hosses out of one man's mount. We had to commence shootin' 'im till we killed 'im. He was a big brown animal with a light streak down his back, a reg'lar old Spanish bull with awful keen horns.

"Out on the Rio Grande, I come pretty near gettin' hooked. That was in '80, I believe. It was when the law was passed that people had to quit wearin' their six-shooters and had to carry 'em on the horn of the saddle. I was keepin' talley in some pens that day and somebody yelled, 'Look out!' I looked up in time to see that bull comin'. I had to get to my gun and I wasn't such a good shot either, but I hit 'im a lucky shot and he was comin' with such force, he fell with his head 9 right at my feet.

"Pahaw! I've seen more stampedes than I could count! I've seen 'em where the cattle all get away. It would be so dark you couldn't see a thing. I don't know how fur they would run sometimes. It didn't take us so long to get 'em rounded back together, usually in about a half a day. We would pick up the tracks of the farthest ones and bring 'em in that way. I found it was best to turn 'em loose on a dark night. One night, we had about nine-hundred in a herd down on the Cotulla close to Seawright's and Caruther's ranch. Mr. Rutledge come 'round to me and says, 'What are we goin' to do with these cattle?' I says, 'The best thing we can do is to bed 'em and slip off from 'em, for when that rain comes, they will drift, then.' So we did, and about nine o'clock next mornin', we had all them cattle.



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"I think I told you awhile back about the time we brought the herd up from the lower country for Mr. Demp Fenley and Mr. Rutledge? I've thought of that many times. We had one old steer that would graze off from the herd every night when we'd bed 'em down. Mr. Rutledge and me was takin' the last guard in the mornin', so we always bedded the cattle down. That evenin' we camped in a reg'lar pear flat (prickly pear) and Mr. Rutledge motioned to me to come to 'im. He says, 'Now, when that old steer grazes off tonight, I'll cut 'im off from the herd and you ride in and rope 'im and we'll give 'im a good whippin'. Well, the old steer grazed off as usual and Mr. Rutledge run in to cut 'im off from the herd and the old steer run in behind 'im and outrun Mr. Rutledge to the herd. The cattle was all quiet and layin' down and that old steer run in on top of 'em and stampeded 'em. Away they went! We had a green-horn fellow with us and he run to the chuck wagon just as a big old steer run through camp and fell and rolled 10 under the chuck wagon. It nearly scared 'im to death. All hands was out and we run 'em all night long. We'd no sooner get them cattle back till they was gone again. I'd hear Mr. Rutledge yell, 'Promenade!' whenever they'd start and it sure did tickle me. Next mornin' that prickly pear was all lyin' flat on the ground. Mr. Rutledge got around and told me to keep it quiet what started them cattle to runnin' and we never did tell what did it. We had many a laugh over it.

"Many a happy day I've spent cow huntin'. We'd have two packhosses, one for the beddin' and one for the cookin' outfit. We never carried no foolishness along. We had the coffee pot hangin' 'round the hoss' neck and the skillet right on top of the pack, bottom-upwards, and the rope come right across the skillet right between the legs and then the handle was turned back to keep it from ketchin' in the bresh. I can pack an outfit on a hoss right now with my eyes shut.

"We'd carry meal, salt and green coffee. We got out meat and tallow on the range and we cooked our meat on sticks. My! But, it was fine eatin'.

"Them was good days in this country. There wasn't many mean people either. You'd hear of a few outlaws like Joel Collins and Sam Bass. I seen Joel Collins but I don't remember

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Sam Bass. I've seen Kingfisher many a time. He was sure a fine-lookin' fellow. He had black eyes and was dark complected. They say he was some outlaw. I knew he killed several Mexkins in this frontier country, but he wasn't no robber. Well, we never will have good times like those days."

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